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Reagan Selects FBI's Webster To Head CIA

Choice Expected to Appeal
To Intelligence Officials,
Avoid Lengthy Hearings

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan chose William Webster, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to take over as director of the embattled Central Intelligence Agency.

By picking Mr. Webster, a former federal appeals court judge widely respected in Congress as an independent, nonpartisan manager, the White House is likely to avoid a protracted nomination fight. Mr. Webster brings familiarity with some intelligence issues and remains largely unscathed by the Iran-Contra scandal that has shaken the Reagan administration. But the prospect of working for a former judge and law enforcement official is likely to cause apprehension among some members of the CIA's clandestine service who object to legal restrictions on the agency's operations.

The president offered the job, technically called director of central intelligence, to Mr. Webster after being turned down by at least two other candidates. Administration officials said the FBI chief, who initially was reluctant to make the move, accepted after repeated urgings by top White House aides.

The president urged the Senate to confirm Mr. Webster quickly as the new head for the CIA, which has been under fire from lawmakers for its involvement in the administration's secret Iran arms deals and support for the Nicaraguan Contras. Former Director William Casey resigned from the intelligence post Feb. 2 following surgery for a cancerous brain tumor.

Mr. Reagan had nominated Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates to succeed Mr. Casey, but Mr. Gates withdrew Monday in the face of mounting congressional criticism and White House



William Webster

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concern that his nomination would keep the spotlight on the Iran-Contra affair. Investigators have questioned Mr. Gates's independence from White House political pressures and his failure to inform Congress that he suspected proceeds from the arms sales were being diverted to the Contras.

President Reagan said in a statement that Mr. Webster, 62, was "well known as a man of honor and integrity, as a man who is committed to the rule of law."

Congressional leaders praised Mr. Webster for improving the FBI's image, its professionalism and its relations with Congress. When he took the helm at the agency in 1978, it was still demoralized by its involvement in Watergate. Sen. Joseph Biden (D., Del.), chairman of the Judiciary Committee, yesterday described Mr. Webster as a "fine, fine leader," adding, "I've never once had to question anything" he has told Congress.

Bound to Raise Questions

Despite the good will for Mr. Webster on Capitol Hill, some lawmakers are bound to raise questions about his early handling of the Iran-Contra investigation.

Before the Iran-Contra scandal became public, Mr. Webster suspended, for nearly a month, an FBI criminal investigation of a Miami-based cargo airline suspected of shipping arms both to Iran and Nicaraguan rebels. A request to sidetrack the probe had come from Attorney General Edwin Meese, who said it might hamper efforts to recover U.S. hostages in the Middle East.

The FBI also has come under attack from some lawmakers for allegedly failing to investigate aggressively a pattern of break-ins involving groups opposed to U.S. policy toward Central America.

Nevertheless, retired Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, who formerly served as CIA deputy director and head of the National Security Agency, expressed both relief and satisfaction at Mr. Webster's nomination.

Functioning Under Constraints

Some intelligence officers have questioned whether U.S. intelligence services can function effectively under restrictions imposed by Congress in the 1970s. But Adm. Inman maintained that under Mr. Webster, the CIA will be able to function effectively within the confines of current statutes.

"At a time when the past procedures at the CIA need to be critically examined, he brings both clarity of mind and superb instincts," Adm. Inman said. "I'm persuaded that the job that needs to be done can be done within the constraints of the law."

Mr. Webster, a dignified, methodical manager who delayed retiring from the FBI last year in order to help oversee the bureau's investigation of the Iran-Contra affair, has spoken out publicly against some White House-supported covert operations—including proposals to kidnap sus-

pected terrorists in foreign countries and bring them to the U.S. to face trial.

Illustrating the turmoil and uncertainty besetting the administration, the White House announced the selection of Mr. Webster before senior Justice Department officials—including the attorney general's chief of staff—were notified.

The administration didn't name a replacement for Mr. Webster, and Justice Department officials said a serious search hadn't yet started. Some administration officials floated the names of several candidates—all of whom were mentioned last year when Mr. Webster talked about leaving the bureau. The list includes Associate Attorney General Stephen Trott; former Deputy Attorney General D. Lowell Jensen, who is now a federal district court judge in California; and former Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani, currently the U.S. attorney in Manhattan.

However, some officials speculated that Mr. Giuliani harbors hopes of challenging New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and that Mr. Jensen may be unwilling to leave California. They concluded that the White House is more likely to choose an outsider for the FBI post.

Associates of Mr. Webster said the White House sounded out the FBI chief about the CIA post from the White House even before Mr. Casey resigned. The White House subsequently offered the job to Howard Baker, who later was named White House chief of staff, and to former Republican Sen. John Tower, before formally offering it to Mr. Webster, but they turned it down, according to administration officials.

During his more than nine years at the helm of the FBI, Mr. Webster took a leadership role in combating terrorist networks, infiltrating drug rings and targeting organized crime groups and corrupt labor unions for prosecution. Under his leadership, the bureau relied increasingly on sophisticated surveillance, undercover operations and computer methods, while guarding against such excesses as unauthorized domestic surveillance that sullied its image in the 1970s.

In another development in the White House's effort to put the Iran-Contra scandal behind it, attorneys for select House and Senate investigative committees took testimony yesterday from former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan regarding the Iran-Contra matter. Neither side made any comment on the session, which ran at least two hours, according to sources.

Though informed of the administration's arms sales to Iran, Mr. Regan has repeatedly denied any knowledge of profits being diverted to aid the Contras.

JOHN WALCOTT CONTRIBUTED
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